



Courting Tragedy: *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, City Comedy, and Revenge Tragedy

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Abstract: Brian Attebery writes in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) about reading fantasy as a mode rather than a genre. Following his lead, I look at Scott Lynch's *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (2006) as a revenge tragedy in the fantastic mode. I prove that the novel is a revenge tragedy by genre through tracing the elements commonly associated with Renaissance plays, as outlined in Wendy Griswold's *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre 1576–1980* (1986). *The Lies of Locke Lamora* moves from city comedy to two different kinds of revenge tragedy, the English and the Senecan, of which the latter ends in disillusionment in terms of power hierarchies. Linda Woodbridge's *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (2010) provides support for my argument that reading Lynch's debut as a revenge tragedy reveals its political themes and places it in the context of the history of literature.

Keywords: Brian Attebery, Wendy Griswold, Linda Woodbridge, Scott Lynch, revenge tragedy, fantasy

Brian Attebery writes in *Strategies of Fantasy* (1992) that fantasy readers “may find a continuity in literature that is denied to those who must draw lines and enforce standards” (ix). In other words, all previous literature affects the literature of today, whether intentionally or not. Often a novel may be approached through different aspects of its intertextual make-up, and the choice of whether to read it through its, say, mode or formula may make a difference in the reader's interpretation.

This is the case with Scott Lynch's debut novel *The Lies of Locke Lamora* (2006), a story of a master thief and his friends whose lives are upended by the political turmoil in their home city. While the book is marketed as fantasy and adheres to that mode, it rewards examination through the formula from which it draws: reading *The Lies of Locke Lamora* as following the conventions of revenge tragedy shows that the novel reflects on politics in the same way the plays of Classical origin and their successors have done through literary history. Therefore, I will in this paper follow Attebery and read Lynch's novel as fantastic only in mode. It is my hope that this will exemplify the usefulness of examining novels categorised as fantasy through longer-established forms and thus blur the line between what is considered "genre" literature and so-called mainstream fiction. Moreover, my aim is, to quote Linda Woodbridge in her remarkable *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (2010), "not genre definition but the cultural work that literary revenge performs" (5); I will therefore refer to conventions, modes, and elements, rather than attempt to define genres.

In accordance with the features it shares with drama, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* can be divided into three parts: the city comedy; the English revenge tragedy, which ends in restoration of order; and the Senecan tragedy, which ends in chaos and disillusionment. Of these, the English revenge tragedy is long-established as a conscious choice on the author's part: Lynch has been explicit about the influence that English Renaissance revenge tragedies such as Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1582–1592), Tourneur's *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1606), and Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1612–1613) have had on his debut (personal correspondence). Comparing the events and occurrences of *The Lies of Locke Lamora* to those listed by Wendy Griswold in *Renaissance Revivals: City Comedy and Revenge Tragedy in the London Theatre 1576–1980* (1986) confirms Lynch's firm familiarity with the conventions and tropes of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. The prologue anticipates the revenge drama to come, but the first few chapters set the scene through city-comedy conventions. While hints of the tragedy to come are peppered throughout, it is in the next two sections of the book, analysed below, that tragedy overwhelms the comedy.

Revenge drama is political, as discussed by Linda Woodbridge in *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (2010). Tanya Pollard agrees in "Tragedy and Revenge" (2010) that revenge "redresses injustice caused by abuses of power" (59). I will therefore posit that *The Lies of Locke Lamora* is, first and foremost, a political novel. The first three sections of this paper will consider the novel in terms of how it conforms to the elements of city comedy, English revenge tragedy, and Senecan revenge tragedy, as outlined by Griswold. This will show that, in concert with Woodbridge's claim that revenge can also be comic (45), and Lynch's careful scattering of revenge elements in the deceptively comic city-comedy section, the reader is in fact never quite out of the realm of revenge drama. In the conclusion, I will discuss the political outcome of Lynch's debut and its philosophy of power structures.

“The Don Salvara Game”; or, The City and the Pursuit of Fortune, Status, and Love

What I term the city-comedy section of Lynch’s novel encompasses everything from the first chapter, “The Don Salvara Game” through to the end of the interlude “The Last Mistake”. This section introduces the reader to the landmarks, peculiarities, and inhabitants of the city of Camorr, presents a motivation for action, and depicts the morality – or lack thereof – of the main cast of characters. Lynch also establishes the political status quo that will soon be upended.

In the same way that London is the setting of Renaissance city comedies (Griswold 16–17), Camorr is the setting of *The Lies of Locke Lamora*. The first chapter has two timelines, one describing the first steps of a con game and the other the morning leading up to it. Both serve a function: the game timeline introduces characters, and the morning timeline the city’s landmarks. It is already noteworthy that the morning timeline is alive with amusing banter and the delight of competent tricksters (Griswold 38–47) and, in its frolicking humour and verbal flamboyance, guides attention away from certain details in the con-game timeline, to be discussed below. The hierarchies of Camorr are given concisely in this brief exchange between Locke and the young apprentice Bug:

“Gods, I love this place,” Locke said, drumming his fingers against his thighs. “Sometimes I think the whole city was put here simply because the gods must adore crime. Pickpockets rob the common folk, merchants rob anyone they can dupe, Capa Barsavi robs the robbers *and* the common folk, the lesser nobles rob nearly everyone, and Duke Nicovante occasionally runs off with his army and robs the shit out of Tal Verrar or Jerem, *not to mention* what he does to his own nobles and his common folk.”

“So that makes us robbers of robbers,” said Bug, “who pretend to be robbers working for a robber of other robbers.” (*TLoLL* 40)

From this description we learn that the Gentlemen Bastards, as Locke and his gang are called, are underdogs in a corrupt system. And revenge is, after all, “the resort of the underdog” (Woodbridge 265). Their being “robbers of other robbers” can be interpreted as a social revenge on those who have more than they ought, in a way reminiscent of Robin Hood. Like Robin Hood, as Griswold observes, tricksters as a character type defy power structures (40). The Gentleman Bastards are both trickster characters and Robin Hood-like in stealing from the rich, thus combining the socio-political goal (humbling those in economic power) with the method of outsmarting those they wish to punish. As the underdogs of society, they compromise the power structures of Camorr through intelligence and thievery.

Once the reader is familiarised with the hierarchy and the landmarks of the city, such as the on-water Shifting Market and the Five Towers (*TLoLL* 38–40), it is time to meet the characters for the city-comedy section. In line with Griswold, they are socially heterogenous (17–18). Even just among the Gentlemen Bastards there are numerous social strata: Locke’s origins are unknown, the Sanza twins are from a poor neighbourhood, Jean was born to merchant parents, and the apprentice Bug comes from a district so foul he will

not speak of it. They happily mingle with the more upstanding citizens introduced in the first chapter. The Don and Doña Salvara are minor nobility and have a family retainer, Conté. In addition to these active characters, Camorr features constables, merchants, and visitors from other cities and city states, akin to Lukas Fehrwight, whom Locke impersonates.

The impersonations Locke and his gang perform are a sign of the social mobility Griswold marks as one of the elements of city comedy (21–22), although not a simple one. While the characters that belong to the city comedy, like the Salvaras, are clearly of a social-climbing type, the Gentlemen Bastards are more of a conundrum. They are socially mobile to the extreme, being able to move both up and down the ladder of society more or less at will, but they do not aspire to a permanent high status. They have the training to pass in any kind of company and, judging by the word of their mentor, Father Chains, it seems to be for the sake of trickery itself – another important element, as Griswold (18–20) notes. When Locke first comes to the Gentlemen Bastards, he and Chains have the following conversation that springs from Locke’s incomprehension as to why anyone would want a knife just for spreading butter:

“This is a lot of trouble to go to just to eat.”

“Well, in Shades’ Hill you may be able to eat cold bacon and dirt pies off one another’s arses for all your old master cares. But now you’re a Gentleman Bastard, emphasis on the Gentleman. You’re going to learn how to eat like this, and how to serve people who eat like this.”

“Why?”

“Because, Locke Lamora, one day you’re going to dine with barons and counts and dukes. You’re going to dine with merchants and admirals and generals and ladies of every sort! And when you do ... When you do, those poor idiots won’t have any idea that they’re really dining with a thief.” (*TLoLL* 100)

Father Chains is training his acolytes to play at any social occasion, at any echelon. Lynch reveals no particular reason why the Gentlemen Bastards would wish to mingle with the upper classes. Within the scope of *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, the sole reason for tricking people seems to be to get money out of them, and enjoying the superiority of intellect. At the city-comedy stage, the reader is invited only to enjoy the gang’s cleverness, not to question their motivations for staging elaborate crimes. The natural leap of thought is to assume that the trickery is employed in order to gain money, which is the main motivator of action in city comedy (Griswold 20–21).

Tricking people into giving one money is, of course, morally suspect, which falls in with the element of moral ambiguity (Griswold 23–25). Lynch brings the mockery of socially acceptable morals to the foreground through a recurring joke among the gang of thieves: whenever they have their apprentice perform a tedious task, such as poling the barge or doing the dishes, they declare it good for his “moral education” (*TLoLL* 34, 115). It is not only the Gentlemen Bastards, either, who engage in actions that are of questionable morality. In Camorr, underhanded dealings are commonplace, as evidenced by Don Salvara’s willingness to sweet talk the supposed Fehrwight – Locke in disguise – into making a deal with him rather than with his rival, Don Jacobo (54). In this case, money drives the action, just as expected, and the “trickster

capitalizes on the vanity of others” (Griswold 40). Locke and his crew want money out of Don Salvara and use his feud with Don Jacobo to their advantage to strike a lucrative deal.

Greed also functions as a sign of the cynicism rife in city comedy (Griswold 22–23). Don Salvara believes Locke/Fehrwight because he wants to believe in easy money, and all Locke has to do is make sure Salvara, an upstanding merchant with scruples and connections, sees what he wants to see. In a masterful piece of trickery, Locke, in the guise of a member of the city’s secret agency, tells Salvara just that: “And if a man, a very clever man, wished you to think him a merchant ... well, what would he dress up and present himself as? ... I mean, m’lord Salvara, that your own expectations have been used against you” (111). Don Salvara’s own hopes and expectations are ruthlessly played against him. This is an example of the “recoil” effect of revenge. Salvara’s own greed leads to his loss of money, which is, in Woodbridge’s words, an “automatic, self-inflicted revenge, recoil in vengeance with no avenger” (196). Locke is not a de facto avenger in this situation; rather, he is taking advantage of Salvara’s own weaknesses, which only so happen to lead to socio-economic revenge.¹

Thus Lynch has set the scene: a bustling, amoral city where corruption is rife and only the clever can flourish. From here, the movement is towards the murky courts of revenge tragedy. The final chapter of the section, an interlude called “The Last Mistake”, is the last chapter in which *The Lies of Locke Lamora* should be taken for a comedy. The place to which the title refers is an inn, a decidedly city-comedy location, favoured by the thieves and assorted other extralegal elements of Camorri society. It is where young Locke swears fealty to the kingpin of the underworld, Capa Barsavi, a sort of Godfather figure, and his daughter, Nazca. As one of Barsavi’s *garristas*, the word for gang leader, he holds a modest amount of power, but remains liminal and powerless in the revenge drama about to take place.

“At the Court of Capa Barsavi”; or, English Revenge Drama and Besting the Tyrant

The first revenge-drama arc, which follows the lines of the English variety in particular, starts when the reader enters the court of Capa Barsavi and ends with Barsavi’s death in “At the Court of Capa Raza”. I call this section “The Grey King Action” after its active revenger. In it, Lynch uses revenge-drama elements with skill and precision, proving his familiarity with the plays of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. Curiously, however, while Locke remains the main character, he and his friends are in fact liminal to the revenge arc that takes place. They are neither the revengers nor the objects of revenge, but merely instruments in the grudge the Grey King holds against Capa Barsavi. This positioning of the main character allows for the development from order to

¹ Woodbridge connects the idea of recoil to the Christian discussion of whether humans are forbidden from taking revenge altogether or whether they are God’s instruments in his vengeance. Locke is in subsequent books tied to religion in his capacity of priest. Through his foil, the Falconer, he is also depicted as an instrument of revenge, and therefore not responsible for it.

chaos later on in the second revenge arc, discussed below. Additionally, as Pollard notes, “foreign settings, extravagant onstage violence, the use of comedy, and metatheatricity, were distinctly Renaissance innovations” (64). As discussed below, this section of the novel contains all of these, although they are made away with in time for the last section.

The English revenge drama most typically takes place in Italian courts (Griswold 58). Camorr, with its canals, sunny weather, and olive-skinned people, is quite obviously based on Venice. The courts are a closed setting, both physically and in terms of the characters, and it is in just such a situation Lynch places his readers in “At the Court of Capa Barsavi”. Barsavi’s court is, moreover, at the heart of an old war barge called *The Floating Grave*, which lends it an even more menacing air. The element of violence is also an important factor in the transition between modes. It comes up early on and fits Griswold to a tee: “Bloodletting abounds in revenge tragedies, often in bizarre forms” (61). When Locke arrives at the Floating Grave to pay his tithes, he walks into an interrogation scene where the Capa’s main torturer works to extract information from the members of another gang in a most gruesome and graphic manner. From this point on, blood flows liberally in *The Lies of Locke Lamora*.

At this point it is useful to note that the lines between the transitions in mode are not clear-cut in this book. Griswold notes that, like bloodletting, sexual “sensationalism is similarly omnipresent” in revenge tragedy, and that “sex and death are linked explicitly and repeatedly” (61). There is little to no sex in *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, and I would argue that this is partly because it has, in this case, merged with the amatory motivation of city comedy (Griswold 19, 21). Barsavi allows the surprised and unwilling Locke permission to court his daughter Nazca, and Locke and Nazca agree to pretend at a romantic connection until the threat of the Grey King is removed. The situation is, naturally, resolved by Nazca’s death soon after. Thus Lynch removes the potential of amatory motivations for action. There is no room for romantic love or sex.²

The murder of Nazca Barsavi is the Grey King’s way to initiate the final steps of his revenge on Capa Barsavi. The trickery that was present in city comedy is also a feature of revenge tragedy, albeit in a more menacing form (Griswold 62). The Grey King forces Locke to play him in an encounter with Barsavi, and thus fakes his own death, meaning to conveniently dispose of Locke at the same time. He also uses his bondsmage – a mercenary wizard – to play tricks that would look good on stage, such as appearing out of thin air, cultivating a reputation for killing men with a touch (*TLoLL* 167–168), and being immune to blades (168). While the Gentlemen Bastards’ trickery seems to stem from the delight of being clever and the desire to acquire money³, the Grey King’s is motivated by revenge, which Griswold notes as the “essential feature of revenge tragedy” (59). Since the Grey King is not the main character of the novel, but is, nonetheless, the active revenger (in other words, the main

² The lack of female characters is a common criticism of *The Lies of Locke Lamora*. I would suggest that it serves a purpose, although likely not by conscious choice: for the revenge drama to be foregrounded, the potential for romantic love must be removed. Claiming there are no interesting, active women in the novel also disregards the last third of the novel, where Doña Sofia Salvara and Doña Vorchenza become key agents in saving the city’s nobility.

³ Their actual reason is not revealed in this book, but appears in the sequel, *Red Seas Under Red Skies* (2007).

character of the revenge drama playing out), the liminality of the novel's de facto main character Locke becomes intriguing. While the Grey King is motivated by revenge, his revenge aspirations are what force Locke to act despite otherwise having no skin in the game. This, shown below, changes in the last section of the novel.

The English revenge tragedy often ends at a banquet and restoration of order after turmoil (Griswold 65), and so does this section of *The Lies of Locke Lamora*: Barsavi meets his end at a revel he throws at the Floating Grave to celebrate his assumed victory over his daughter's murderer. Griswold describes the ending of this kind of drama in three words: success, death, and restoration (64). Two of these take place in "At the Court of Capa Raza". The Grey King succeeds in his revenge by killing Barsavi, and restores power immediately, as "the ruler must die so the Rule [can] live" (99). "It is not my intention merely to remove Barsavi, but to *replace* him," he declares to his new subjects (*TLoLL* 364, emphasis added). Even further, Griswold notes that "what is celebrated is the return of order following the period of disorder represented by all those dead bodies lying about" (65), and so the former Grey King takes "each pledge at the heart of a circle of corpses" (*TLoLL* 367). The gruesomeness remains, but order is restored. What is perceived to be good of Barsavi's reign is kept intact, but a corrupt ruler is replaced with a new one – one no less tyrannical, and even more maleficent.

"At the Court of Capa Raza"; or, The Disillusionment of Senecan Revenge Tragedy

In the concluding chapters of the novel, a new revenge arc begins, with a new avenger and a revenge of a different tradition. If the previous section was "The Grey King Action", the next one is "The Locke Action", again named after its active revenger. Before avenging himself on Barsavi, the Grey King has made the mistake of murdering Locke's friends to gain access to their considerable wealth. The loss of his found family motivates Locke's revenge, making him the active avenger in the last section of the book, which spans from "At the Court of Capa Raza" to the end of the novel. Like the previous section, this one slightly blurs the lines of the transition, as the different kinds of revenge tragedy overlap in this chapter. While the Grey King can be seen as an "aggrieved David [retaliating] against a tyrannical Goliath" (Woodbridge 26) in terms of the status difference between him and Barsavi, exaggerated in scope to encompass more than just Barsavi's family, Locke's revenge is a vendetta, an unexaggerated payment in kind but prone to never-ending cycles.⁴ This last section restarts the revenge tragedy arc, but to a bleaker ending, and removes the last vestiges of city comedy to a point where even the city-comedy characters like the Salvaras become elements of the politics of revenge by embodying the larger society and justice system.

The section starts at the court of the new Capa, signalling the start of a new revenge arc. It is made explicit in the chapter titles: while the previous section started with "At the Court of Capa Barsavi", the narrative is now "At the

⁴ The cycle of vengeance continues through the subsequent novels published at the time of writing, *Red Seas Under Red Skies* and *The Republic of Thieves* (2013).

Court of Capa Raza”. This time the injury requiring vengeance is personal to the main character, removing him from his liminal status. Locke is out to avenge the deaths of Calo, Galdo and Bug, and Nazca, whose death killed all chance of an amatory plot within the scope of the novel. The deaths of the Sanzas, the jokers of the gang, in “Teeth Lessons” removed the comic element, leaving nothing of the comedy that appears throughout the rest of the book. Even the chapter “Orchids and Assassins”, in which Locke masterfully tricks his way into new clothes after the loss of the Gentleman Bastards’ fortune, is framed with money as a secondary motivation. Prior to the scam, Locke tells his friend, “Jean, we need resources to hit out at Raza” (*TLoLL* 397) and, after acquiring a new outfit, comments that they can touch the Salvaras for “money in our pockets. And then revenge” (451). Even though money is the object of the scam, it serves the purposes of revenge.

Death and blood become more prominent in this section, as does Jean’s role, a setup for the novels to come. Jean is indelibly bound to death in the interlude “The Lady of the Long Silence”, in which he is sent on an apprenticeship to the order of the death goddess, and it is left open whether he could really be a chosen one of Aza Guilla – he is trained in arms and takes his own revenge for his friends by killing the twin sisters who killed the Sanza twins. The difference between avengers is to be noted here: the Grey King plans to eradicate everyone who even theoretically allowed the murder of his family, whereas Locke is contented with condign revenge. The Grey King’s revenge is excessive, not satisfied with the end of the Barsavi family. Locke is looking to balance the books, as it were. Further violence ensues: Locke and Jean torture information out of the bondsmage in a shudder-inducing manner, and maim and burn alive the man who put a bolt through Bug’s neck. All culminates in the final chapter proper in the novel, “Justice Is Red”, a phrase used twice within that chapter to communicate that only blood of the perpetrator will bring justice.

It may bring justice, but not satisfaction. Revenge is declared to be “a shit business” (519) and winning “can go fuck itself” (529). This bleakness typifies the main difference between English revenge tragedy and Senecan tragedy: the direction of movement between order and chaos. The English revenge tragedy has a relatively optimistic ending, as it moves from chaos to order, to stability. Senecan tragedies, on the other hand, move from order to chaos and disillusionment (Griswold 91–92), just as *The Lies of Locke Lamora* moves from status quo to new order and finally disorder. The Senecan tragedy has no comic elements, unlike its Renaissance counterpart; this is signalled in this novel by the death of the Sanzas (91). While the avengers of English revenge tragedies die in the end, as the Grey King does, Senecan protagonists generally live (91). To further emphasise the Senecan ending, Locke contrives the sinking of the Grey King’s false plague ship *Satisfaction*, one of the portents of doom – according to Griswold, “ghosts or supernatural portents often urge the revenger on” (63) – thus underlining the futility of seeking peace through further violence. It cannot bring satisfaction.

Never Enough

The analysis above has shown that the *Lies of Locke Lamora* is, very strongly, a revenge tragedy in its conventions and ending. Despite the comic beginning and the optimistic ending of the Grey King Action, all eventually ends in misery. Of a gang of five, only Locke and Jean remain, and even they leave behind the city that has been their home. Ultimately, the novel questions what kind of leadership, as depicted in each of the sections as outlined in this article, works. As it turns out, none of them really does. The comedy rule of the Duke of Camorr means very little at any point, apart from being the legal jurisdiction of Camorr. Barsavi is a cowardly leader, in the end too self-interested and scared to lose the power he has gained to make a potentially risky stand against an outside threat. The Grey King, as Capa Raza, is even more tyrannical than Barsavi. Don Salvara aligns himself with the state of Camorr and its justice system by saying, “It is unlikely that I can give you justice. For that, Camorr again apologises” (52). As Locke learns at the end of the novel, Camorr and its hierarchic power cannot be trusted to provide justice for the individual.

As the powers that be cannot provide justice, it becomes a focus for action and for calls to question power structures in the novel’s world. It is revealed in the next book in the series, *Red Seas Under Red Skies* (2007), that stealing from the rich is done for social levelling. The gang’s mentor, Father Chains, has taught them to live by two mandates: “thieves prosper” and “rich remember”, that is, stealing from the rich reminds them they are not invulnerable or invincible. A tell-tale sign of these mandates already appears in *Lies*, when Locke tells the Grey King he “would have given it [the fortune of the Gentlemen Bastards] all to keep Calo and Galdo and Bug alive” and that the “stealing was more the point for us than the keeping” (512). Looking back, an even earlier indication occurs in the chapter “At the Court of Capa Barsavi”: “Other than financing further theft, the Gentlemen Bastards really had no idea what they were eventually going” to do with their vast amount of stolen money (153). When money – or romantic love, for Nazca and Locke were never the beginning of a comedy of errors – does not matter, comedy is no longer an option. In terms of drama, this leaves us with tragedy.

If the individual cannot gain justice through official and legal channels, they resort to taking matters in their own hands, according to revenge-tragedy tradition. Thus revenge becomes an act of revolt against a system that does not care for the individual’s grievance. In the case of *The Lies of Locke Lamora*, the problem presents itself in multiple ways. The Duke and his magistrates have a deal with Capa Barsavi, described as favourable (190, 445), called the Secret Peace. Under this deal, the thieves are allowed to rob the people of Camorr, as long as they abstain from violence and murder and keep away from the nobility. Capa Barsavi’s justice is based on feelings rather than objective facts, as seen with the creative torture scene with Sage Kindness in “At the Court of Capa Barsavi”, during which he is convinced that the members of his most trusted gang are lying despite there being no evidence that they are and with not even extremely violent torture drawing confessions out of them (169–173). Finally, the Grey King’s justice is only for himself. There is nowhere Locke can turn to balance the books, to borrow Woodbridge’s illuminating simile, but to extralegal justice, the kind Francis Bacon described as “wild” (10). *The Lies of*

Locke Lamora goes from the protagonists revolting against the state to revolting against corrupt rulers.

The fantastic mode merely adds a removing effect to *Lies*, keeping the gritty violence of Camorr a step back from the reader's real life – however violent it may actually be – rather than being its *raison d'être*. As Attebery has it, nearly “all modern fantasy has made ... raids on the recorded inventory of traditional narratives ... some accounts are overdrawn, such as Arthurian legend and romance” (8). Revenge tragedy cannot be called an untapped tradition in books marketed as fantasy, but is certainly less common than Attebery's examples. In an interview for GamesRadar in 2007, Lynch was asked whether there were any conventions he, as a fan of fantasy literature, set out to break in his own series. He answered:

I wanted to write a series in which none of the protagonists had supernaturally-granted powers, or Destinies Foreordained From On High, because it's just too easy to make the lazy mechanism of prophecy/destiny the force that drives (or excuses) your plot in place of human schemes and desires. The unexamined 'chosen one' plot is one of those few old chestnuts that bores me to such an extreme that I'll bring it up in public. I also wanted to write a series that didn't skimp on the unfortunate realities of life in a world without things like antibiotics, refrigeration, and writs of habeas corpus.... Locke's world is, to my mind, quite beautiful and striking, but it's not a land of pastoral innocence and cleanliness. (“Interview with SFX”)

While the fantastic in *The Lies of Locke Lamora* allows the reader some remove from the events of the novel, it is the revenge tragedy that brings the real-life questions of justice to the fore, while also mimicking the way “human schemes and desires” affect those questions. As with tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the round table, it is reasonable to assume that readers at least in the Western world would have at minimum a passing familiarity with revenge drama through Shakespeare. The historical and cultural milieu has changed since the publication of *The Lies of Locke Lamora* in 2006, of course, but unfortunately stories of tyrants and corrupt rules remain relevant. The fantastic keeps the story entertaining and relevant through historical change; revenge tragedy reminds us that these stories are cyclical and that history tends to repeat itself. With its different depictions of power, rulers, and victories, *The Lies of Locke Lamora* asks: how can rule be just?

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